

One of the inner circle of legislators who advised President Bush on the wording of a resolution authorizing him to use force in Iraq now says information warning of weapons of mass destruction represents "one of the top three intelligence failures in our country's history."

"It's clear we've got to reform the intelligence community," 10th District U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk said in an interview Thursday with the Daily Herald. Kirk has questioned the intelligence in recent months but these were his strongest comments to date.

Kirk, who calls himself an independent Republican, said the information regarding Iraq was on par with lapses that led to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor during World War II and the terrorist attacks on New York and the Pentagon on Sept. 11, 2001.

He said President Bush should admit the mistake and "fix" the intelligence system to include analysts who "show no fear" in their reports to the White House. But Kirk said he still believes the world is safer without Hussein in control.

Kirk was commenting on findings presented Wednesday by chief U.S. weapons inspector Charles Duelfer, which said Hussein's weapons of mass destruction programs had been destroyed in 1992 and production never resumed.

Another Republican lawmaker, 8th District Rep. Phil Crane of Wauconda, was in general agreement with Kirk's assessment.

"The colossal intelligence failures prior to the commencement of Operation Iraqi Freedom have only underscored the vital need for intelligence reform," Crane said in a statement.

The report fueled Kirk challenger Lee Goodman and other area Democratic congressional candidates.

"The report is just one more indication of why Kirk has some explaining to do," said Goodman, the Democratic challenger in the 10th District, which covers southeastern Lake and northeastern Cook counties.

"What we have to do is decide when we're leaving," Iraq, added Goodman, a self-employed mediator from Northbrook. "While we are dithering, people are dying needlessly."

Kirk, a Highland Park resident, is running for re-election for a third term and is a member of the House Appropriations Committee. He said he worked with Duelfer for years and agreed with the findings.

"If he says that's the way it is, that's the way it is," said Kirk. During his re-election campaign two years ago, Kirk, a Naval Reserve intelligence officer with 15 years of experience including a stint protecting the no-fly zone in northern Iraq, said he had seen "direct" evidence that Hussein presented a threat.

Kirk contended he has seen "a number of times when we've gotten it right," in terms of military intelligence, but Iraq was not one of them.

"The buck stops here," he said. "For the president, it's incumbent on him to say mistakes were made and it's incumbent on him to fix it." One way would be to stop political appointments to the Central Intelligence Agency.

Career employees are needed "to be able to tell the President especially what he doesn't want to hear. We need analysts at the agency that show no fear," according to Kirk.

Bush on Thursday said there was a "real risk" that Hussein would pass weapons, materials or information to terrorist networks. A Bush spokesman said the report justified the decision to go to war.

Crane said the report also indicated Hussein intended to resume his weapons program when sanctions were lifted and maintained the expertise and knowledge to do so.

Crane's opponent, Melissa Bean of Barrington, said the report confirmed the "urgent and crucial need" to reform the process of gathering and analyzing intelligence information.

Kirk was stoic when asked if he would again vote to invade Iraq.

"I think the Congress probably would have thought differently," he said. "Our job is to lay before the American people what we should do in January 2005," when Iraqi elections are scheduled.

"I think the world is safer without Saddam Hussein."

Sixth District Republican Congressman Henry Hyde of Wood Dale is chairman of the House International Relations Committee, which has been crafting a bill to address concerns of the 9-11 Commission.

"He'd be the first to tell you there were intelligence failures," said Hyde's press secretary Jennifer Palmer. "But they're working hard to fix the system."

Christine Cegelis, a Rolling Meadows computer consultant who is running against Hyde in the 6th District, which covers parts of northwest Cook and northeast DuPage counties, said the report verified what many Americans suspected.

"That's why many of us were opposed to the war to begin with. The point is, there was a diplomatic way around this war that we didn't use," she said. "The situation we've created is worse."